



COMBO ROUNDUP!

FIVE NEW TUBE TERRORS

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

Ever since Gibson got the idea to bolt an amplifier and speaker into a suitcase, guitar players have been bonded to the combo format. Perfectly sized for smaller rooms and cramped travel conditions, combo amps evolved rapidly during the 1950s and '60s—

decades that saw the emergence of many of the now-classic designs from Fender, Gibson, Magnatone, Ampeg, Marshall, and Vox. Mesa/Boogie's introduction of the high-gain Mark I and channel-switching Mark II models in the '70s and '80s gave



newfound powers to the combo, and the rise of boutique companies in the 1990s brought back such old-school elements as handwired circuits, alnico speakers, and solid-wood cabinetry. By the end of the decade, digital modeling combos had given players the ability to recreate the sounds of popular amps with the twist of a knob.

But for all the great leaps forward in technology, it's still pretty hard to beat a tube combo with 30 to 50 watts of power, one or two 12" speakers, and a spring reverb—especially if you're a club player. This roundup focuses on five new tube amps with

street prices that vary from \$630 to more than \$2,900. They differ significantly in design and features, but are all intended to fill the needs of blues and rock guitarists who primarily do their thing on small stages.

There are plenty of other amplifiers that meet these criteria, of course, but this sampling of boutique and production models proves that no matter how large or small your budget, there's a tube amp that's right for you. We tested these combos using various Fender Strats and Teles, a Gibson '68 reissue Les Paul, a Gretsch White Falcon, and a PRS McCarty.



ZOOM

The '36 Coupe comes with an ace footswitch that features clearly lighted functions.



ZOOM

Removing the '36 Coupe's panel reveals a modern-style PC board circuit. The output tubes are protected by a metal cage that must be removed to gain access.

KUSTOM '36 COUPE

With its sparkling blue tuck 'n' roll trim and classic script logo, the '36 Coupe (\$899 retail/\$639 street) revisits Kustom's colorful amps of the '60s and '70s. But that's not all it shares with those classics. While this new model (along with its larger sibling, the '72 Coupe) is fresh from the ground up, design chief James Brown (formerly with Peavey) says that the Coupe's EQ and reverb Tone control—as well as the speaker's

aluminum dust cap—were all inspired by vintage Kustom amplifiers.

The '36 Coupe (which very honestly states that it's made in the USA with U.S. and imported parts) sports Rhythm and Lead channels, which can be selected via footswitch or top-panel toggle. The channels share a common set of Tone and Reverb controls, and the amp offers such amenities as an XLR out with speaker

emulation, dual speaker outs, an effects loop, and a footswitchable Boost function with Level control. The speaker emulation circuitry is designed to replicate the sound of the amp's cabinet and speaker through a P.A. or recording console. A "mixed biasing" system (a combination of cathode- and fixed-bias techniques) allows you to change the output tubes without the need to re-bias the amp.

The Coupe's Rhythm channel is crisp and well balanced at lower settings, and it distorts with authority when turned up. You can get some serious crunch at high Volume settings, and I found that putting the Volume at about 11 o'clock with the Master dimed was perfect for live use. I was then able to get a fierce lead sound by simply clicking on the Boost function. The EQ is well implemented, and having a Bright switch on both channels is a smart idea when you've got a shared set of tone controls.

The Lead channel's ultra-smooth voicing will please those who love buttery, high-gain textures. However, as the Coupe's moderate power doesn't provide a great deal of clean headroom, it can be challenging to get enough definition from this channel when you're competing with loud bass and drums. Keeping the Lead channel's

Volume knob at or below 9 o'clock helps, as does using the speaker-emulated D.I. out. Brown says his team designed the circuit primarily for stage use, and it worked great, producing a sound through the mains and monitors that sounded exactly like the amp—only bigger and louder.

A buzzing noise from the speaker did rear its head late into one gig, however. Brown attributed this to a loose dust cap on a pre-production speaker that may have been used in early review versions of the amp. After installing a fresh KEI speaker, I ran the amp flat out for several hours on a second gig without any trouble.

The '36 Coupe is an intriguing and well-conceived amp that has what it takes for anything from jazz to metal. With its classy looks, great clean and overdriven tones, and affordable price, there's a lot to like about this new Kustom.

KUDOS Wide ranging Rhythm channel. Ultra-smooth overdrive tones. Excellent speaker emulation on direct out. All birch-plywood cabinet construction. Footswitch functions clearly indicated.

CONCERNS Reverb tank bag needs to be better secured to the cabinet.

CONTACT Kustom, (800) 999-5558; kustom.com

SPECS

- 36 watts
- Two footswitchable channels with independent Bright switches and Volume and Master controls
- Bass, Middle, Treble, Reverb Level and Tone controls
- Accutronix reverb
- Two Sovtek 6L6WXT output tubes/four Electro-Harmonix 12AX7EH preamp tubes
- Kustom-Eminence Integrated Turbo 12" speaker
- Global Boost function (variable from 0 to +10dB)
- D.I. XLR out with speaker emulation
- Tube-driven effects loop
- Impedance selector (4, 8, 16 ohm)
- Dual speaker outs
- 43 lbs